

“Love in a Time of Covid-19: How to Spiritually Prepare for a Pandemic”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading

*Our reading comes from A. A. Milne's pen, telling of the adventures Winnie the Pooh and friends.
The subject of what I already hear is a wonderful new exhibit at the ROM.*

It occurred to Pooh and Piglet
that they hadn't heard from Eeyore for several days,
so they put on their hats and coats
and trotted across the Hundred Acre Wood
to Eeyore's stick house.
Inside the house was Eeyore.

"Hello Eeyore," said Pooh.

"Hello Pooh. Hello Piglet," said Eeyore,
in a Glum Sounding Voice.

"We just thought we'd check in on you," said Piglet,
"because we hadn't heard from you,
and so we wanted to know if you were okay."

Eeyore was silent for a moment.
"Am I okay?" he asked, eventually.
"Well, I don't know, to be honest.
Are any of us really okay?
That's what I ask myself.
All I can tell you, Pooh and Piglet,
is that right now I feel really rather Sad, and Alone,
and Not Much Fun To Be Around At All.
Which is why I haven't bothered you.
Because you wouldn't want to waste your time
hanging out with someone who is Sad, and Alone,
and Not Much Fun To Be Around At All, would you now."

Pooh looked at Piglet, and Piglet looked at Pooh,
and they both sat down,
one on either side of Eeyore in his stick house.

Eeyore looked at them in surprise.
"What are you doing?"

"We're sitting here with you," said Pooh,
"because we are your friends.
And true friends don't care if someone
is feeling Sad, or Alone,
or Not Much Fun To Be Around At All.
True friends are there for you anyway.
And so here we are."

"Oh," said Eeyore. "Oh."
And the three of them sat there in silence,
and while Pooh and Piglet said nothing at all;
somehow, almost imperceptibly,
Eeyore started to feel a very tiny little bit better.

Because Pooh and Piglet were There.

No more; no less.

Sermon: "Love in a Time of COVID 19"

On this glorious late-winter morning
that hints already of spring,
it feels oddly out of place
to reflect on the coronavirus, now known as COVID-19.

But I understand that the possibility of this pandemic
is weighing heavily on most if not all of our hearts and minds,
and so I make it the subject of my sermon today.

I do so, in part, because there are deep theological issues
brought forward with the arrival of this virus.

And I do so because I've been struck by how very little commentary

there's been in the cascade of information coming our way about the spiritual implications of widespread illness.

As important as it is to undertake the preparations recommended by public health officials—stocking up on groceries and medications, upping our handwashing game, and monitoring our own health—I believe it is just as important to prepare spiritually for the many ways the coronavirus may upend our lives in the coming weeks and months.

It's hard on some level to appreciate that we've only known of this virus for ten weeks.

What seemed to be an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan on New Year's Eve is now a global health emergency affecting countries around the world.

You often hear me say that what touches the life of one of us touches us all.

For better and, at times, for worse.

This moment reminds us that, for all of the great achievements of our species, we are not set apart from the web of life, but are a part of the web, with all of its complicated entanglements.

What was a mere germ in an animal market half the world away just a few weeks ago has now spread itself around the planet, with the help of humans and our airplanes and ships.

To this point, all of the cases identified in Toronto can be traced to individuals who have travelled to viral hot spots elsewhere and to the people who have been in closest contact with them.

The risk of transmission in Toronto is very low at present.

But that is likely to change,
if cases of local transmission are found in our city.

That moment, if and when it arrives, will be a defining one.

For it will be a measure of our humanity.
And a test of our principles and values.

A moment when we will need to resist the urge to panic,
and, instead, move through the reality that is before us
with every bit of grace and good-will we can summon.

This is not to say we won't feel fear.
Already there are things about the impact of this virus
that are rightly worrying.

Some of us are feeling understandably vulnerable,
as we wonder about our own ability
or the ability of someone we love to make it through this.

This is especially true for our elders
and those with compromised immune systems.

Each week, in our covenant, we state that we seek to serve life.

Every one of us is likely to be called to make that promise real
in the weeks and months ahead, as we all pull together
to help slow the spread of this virus.

To the degree to which we are able to slow down the spread,
we will protect our healthcare system
from being suddenly overwhelmed,
and allow its resources to be prioritized
for the care of those who most need it.

This means that regular and vigorous handwashing
becomes nothing less than a spiritual practice.

That isolating ourselves if we have even the slightest sign of illness
becomes an act of great compassion for the wider community.

And it means that if we are blessed with good health,
we bear a sacred responsibility
to look after the welfare of those around us.

All of this is love in action.
All of this is service to life itself.

So let me reiterate what I've just said.

Do everything you can to foster good health and hygiene,
for yourself and others.

Eat well, take your vitamins, and get enough sleep.
And wash your hands like someone's life depends on it.
Because it just may.

If you're not feeling 100% healthy, stay home.
Don't go to school or to work.
And don't come to activities here at First.

If not working presents a financial hardship,
please let me or Rev. Lynn know,
as we can offer some assistance
through the Minister's Discretionary Fund.

If you, at any point, feel any symptoms
that might point to COVID-19, immediately
call your doctor or a health centre for directions about what to do.

And reach out to me or Lynn, as well as those around you
in our congregation and in the wider circle of your life.

In moments like this, we truly need one another.

Though we are likely to be encouraged or required to practice social distancing—
holding ourselves at a physical distance from others, or isolating ourselves at home,
to the extent possible—
this is a time for us to build up our ties with others in different ways.

Reach out to strengthen your relationships with those around you.

Widen the boundaries of your community.

Knock on your neighbours' doors now, today,
and make sure you know how to call on each other
if you're in need later on.

If you're concerned about someone, reach out.
Showing up unannounced, and in person, like Pooh and Piglet,
is probably ill-advised, but check in on the people in your life
to find out how they are and learn whether
there's anything they need.
If you can help fill a need, do.

In simpler times and smaller places,
much of this comes naturally.

But for us, today, in this megalopolis,
we need to revive some ancient, human ways of being,
ways of tending the well-being of the community.

In this era that so celebrates the individual
and chases after self-help cures for whatever ails us,
we need to return to the work of building up enduring community.

The research of sociologist Michael Ungar,
a professor at Dalhousie, points to the fact
that there is, indeed, strength in numbers.

He says:

We have been giving people the wrong message.
Resilience is not a DIY endeavour.
Self-help fails because
the stresses that put our lives in jeopardy in the first place
remain in the world around us
even after we've taken the "cures."
The fact is that people who can find
the resources they require for success in their environments
are far more likely to succeed than individuals
with positive thoughts and the latest power poses.

What kind of resources?

The kind that get you through the inevitable crises
that life throws our way. A bank of sick days.

Some savings or an extended family who can take you in. Neighbours
or a congregation willing to bring over a casserole,
shovel your driveway or help care for your children
while you are doing whatever you need to do
to get through the moment.

Communities with police, social workers,
home-care workers, fire departments,
ambulances and food banks.

His research on resilience shows
that our inner resources are rarely of much use, in the long run,
unless we have a nurturing environment around us
to help sustain and support us.

If you have such a system in place already, lean into it.

And if your system is not as robust as it could or should be,
there's no time like the present to start shoring it up.

As we in leadership for the congregation
seek to prepare for the possibility
of an outbreak of the coronavirus in Toronto,
we will be seeking ways to help strengthen the ties that bind us together,
even if, and especially if, it becomes necessary
to shift many or all of our activities online for a time.

But part of this is work that each of you can be helping with,
even now. Here and in other parts of your lives,
seek to strengthen the fabric of community.

I realize on some level that this may seem to be at odds
with the possibility of social distancing
and the need for us to limit our in-person interactions with others.

I think, though, that if we are creative, we can do both.

At the heart of this, is our ability to know,
in our bones, that we need one another.

While we may segregate ourselves physically, there is no need to isolate ourselves from the connection of community.

I've felt this to be even more true after reading about the extremes that some people, especially those with great wealth, are going to try to protect themselves— from chartering private flights to securing yachts that can sail far away from anything that might trouble them.

That impulse to protect ourselves is human.

And it can be seen in less extravagant forms as people hoard facemasks and stockpile more than their fair share of resources.

Admittedly, there's a fine line between stocking up and stockpiling.

When Bob came home with yet another large bag of rice yesterday, we had to have a little family meeting to reflect on which side of the line we were on...

I think the deciding factors are fear, and whether we understand ourselves as part of the wider web of life.

A few years ago, I heard a friend of mine tell the powerful story of her grandmother's ethical dilemma following the attacks on 9-11.

The grandmother, who lived in Manhattan, was a woman of means, and so she set herself to the task to buying a top-of-the-line gas mask.

And then she thought she should buy one for her daughter and her husband and their kids, and, then, one for her housekeeper, as well.

The more she thought about it, she kept adding names to the list.

Until she reached a point

when she decided not to buy any masks at all.

Until she came to understand that her destiny was tied up
with everyone she loved—and with everyone else.

The Buddhist teacher Bo Lozoff,
says that the challenge of being alive is to accept—
and to know it in our bones—that,
“Anything that can happen to a human being may happen to me.”

That, “Anything that can happen to a human being
may happen to me.”

This can be such an incredibly difficult thing
for us to even acknowledge, let alone embrace.

And it can be such an easy thing for us to forget.

That is, until we are shaken awake
by the end of a relationship we didn't see coming,
a diagnosis we weren't the least bit prepared for,
or the news of a sudden loss,
that just doesn't make any sense.

It's easy to forget, until we truly know
that not every aspect of life can be controlled.

It's easy to forget, until we are reminded anew,
that to live is to be vulnerable—
and that to be vulnerable
means that we live with fear
as a sure and steady companion.

The challenge is to make peace
with the presence of fear in our lives,
to make peace with the knowledge
that being human means being acquainted
with vulnerability and with risk.

This moment that we are facing now
offers us yet another opportunity to attempt this.

To come to terms with fear and vulnerability.

The Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig,
writes that in this world:

There are only two feelings: Love and fear.
There are only two languages: Love and fear.
There are only two activities: Love and fear.
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results.
Love and fear. Love and fear.

The question, he seemingly suggests, is which one we serve.
Which one guides our actions most of the time.
Which one, in the end, will give ultimate shape to our lives.

But I wonder what would happen
if we could more readily see
that what we and others fear
is very often deeply tied to what we love?

For we fear because something vital is at stake—
something precious, something of great value—
be it our life, our livelihood, the safety of our family,
or the well-being of our community.

Love can very often be found on the flip-side of fear.

So, it's not so much a choice between the two,
but of coming to know them as of a piece,
as two parts of life's whole, two parts of a whole life.

My hope for us all, in the days ahead,
is that we will lean into love just as much as we can.

So much of what I'm trying to say can be summed up
in the story of Andy Sue and his wife Wing Ye,
who own and operate the Flower Centre over on Kingston Road,
in the Upper Beaches.

The flower shop has been in his family since 1972.

In late January, a woman came through the door,
demanding to know where Andy and Ying were from.

They're from Toronto.

But this woman wanted to know if they had ties to China.
She wanted to know if they or their family had travelled to Wuhan.

They said no, but it didn't matter.

The woman spouted off her racist thoughts about the coronavirus,
and then left the store.

Wing and Andy were left shaken by the experience.

After they shared the story with a reporter,
the news spread on social media.

Many people reached out to offer their reassurance
that this behaviour was not okay.

They were touched by this outpouring.

But David Brown, the owner of a nearby burger joint,
felt compelled to do more.

He decided to post on Facebook that he would give
a free burger on the following Sunday
to anyone who came in with a receipt showing
they had made a purchase over at the Flower Centre that week.

David hoped to drum up a bit of business for his neighbour,
and show his support.

In the end, he gave away over 800 hamburgers,
and The Flower Centre sold out of every single flower they had.

*

Friends, come what may, may we live into our best selves.

May we lean into love, even when we feel fearful.

May we take care of ourselves,
that we may be able to take care of others.

From the struggles we may face,
may we fashion a world, in the words of Langston Hughes,
where “Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.”¹

So may it be.

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace.
Have courage.
Hold onto what is good.
Return to no person evil for evil.
Strengthen the fainthearted.
Support the weak.
Help the suffering.
Honour all beings.

Again, again, and then again.

¹ From Langston Hughes, “I Dream a World,” sung by the choir following the sermon.